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Beyond CSR: Organizational Learning for Global Responsibility

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Abstract

This contribution argues that it is time to move beyond corporate social responsibility (CSR) to "global responsibility". As long as the field retains its old label, the learning agenda for organizations will be too narrow to address the full range of challenges for a sustainable world. It sets too small a stage, invites too few actors to participate and restricts the types of roles they can play. Global responsibility reframes the way issues are defined and the paths along which solutions may be found. After building the argument for the term, the contribution draws on research about organizational learning to identify the kinds of learning that organizations must become skilled at in order to tackle global responsibility. It then illustrates learning processes in a cooperative bank and an international non-governmental association, a multinational corporation, and a multi-stakeholder platform created by the United Nations. These cases show how organizations are combining various types of learning and using physical and virtual learning spaces to generate knowledge for action. The contribution concludes by discussing how to increase the number of organizations engaging in such global responsibility and how to speed up their learning. To this end, lessons are drawn from experiences with the diffusion of voluntary and mandatory approaches to corporate social reporting over the past forty years.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel regt dazu an, den Begriff Corporate Social Responsibility (soziale Verantwortung von Unternehmen) auf globale Verantwortung zu erweitern. Der bisherige Begriff ist in mehrfacher Hinsicht zu eng gefasst, unter anderem weil er sich nur auf Unternehmen und nur auf soziale Verantwortung bezieht und damit andere Organisationstypen und Verantwortungsfelder außer Acht läßt. Das Konzept der globalen Verantwortung erweitert den Bezugsrahmen und damit die potentiellen Lösungsansätze. Die Verwirklichung von globaler Verantwortung in der Praxis wird Organisationen vor große Herausforderungen in Bezug auf Lernen stellen. Daher geht der Beitrag im nächsten Teil auf Erkenntnisse aus dem Bereich des Organisationslernens ein, die dann anhand von mehreren Fallbeispielen verdeutlicht werden. Die Beispiele stammen aus unterschiedlichen Typen von Organisationen: einer Genossenschaftsbank, einer internationalen NGO, einem multinationalen Unternehmen und einer Multi-Stakeholder-Plattform der Vereinten Nationen. Diese Beispiele zeigen auch, wie Organisationen bestimmte Lerntypen kombinieren und sowohl physische als auch virtuelle Räume nutzen, um Wissen über Organisations- und Ländergrenzen hinweg zu generieren. Abschließend werden die Möglichkeiten ausgelotet, die Beteiligung von Organisationen an diese Lernprozesse quantitativ zu erheben und qualitativ zu optimieren. Erfahrungen mit der Diffusion von anderen Instrumenten, beispielsweise Sozialbilanzen, die auf freiwilliger bzw. gesetzlicher Basis beruhen, werden ausgewertet. Die Autoren weisen auf die Notwendigkeit von verbindlichen Vorgaben hin, die einen inhaltlich- und verfahrensorientierten Rahmen liefern, in dem Lernexperimente innerhalb und zwischen Organisationen möglich gemacht werden.

Beyond CSR: Organizational Learning for Global Responsibility[1]

The time has come to recognize that the field of corporate social responsibility has outgrown its name. The past four decades of work by managers, researchers and stakeholders in numerous countries have generated a far broader understanding of the field than its heading connotes. The term "corporate" is too restrictive. It overlooks the multiple organizational forms that must be held responsible for their behavior and impacts, and it does not do justice to the fact that responsibility for achieving sustainable solutions must be exercised jointly by all relevant actors in societies. The label "social" is also too narrow now that years of experience and research have led to the inclusion of the physical as well as the societal environment.

We propose moving beyond corporate social responsibility to the concept of "global responsibility" (Berthoin Antal & Sobczak 2004a). The intention behind establishing this broader heading is twofold: first, to recognize the fact that the field has changed since its inception in the 1960s, and, second, to highlight the fact that organizations of all kinds have a great deal left to learn in order to tackle the full scope of challenges the concept covers. As long as the field remains labeled "corporate social responsibility," the learning agenda will be too narrow. It sets too small a stage, invites too few actors to participate, and restricts the types of roles they can play. At a time when societies are discovering that "it is increasingly beyond the capacity of any single sector of society to respond effectively to the magnitude and complexity of today's challenges" (Ruggie 2004a:16), it is essential that all relevant actors be included on stage. The advantage of introducing a new heading for a field is that it re-frames the way the

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issues are defined and the paths along which solutions may be found. By looking beyond the field of corporate social responsibility and drawing on research on organizational learning, the theory and practice of global responsibility can be advanced.

This contribution therefore first outlines the logic for "global responsibility", then it discusses the organizational learning implications of taking the concept seriously and provides several illustrations of learning processes that different organizations have experienced. In so doing, this paper illustrates the fruitfulness of learning from different theories and from different actors in the field, a strategy that is increasingly called for by researchers and experts (European Multi Stakeholder Forum on CSR 2004). The paper then addresses the question of how to speed up organizational learning for global responsibility beyond the limited number of early innovators. To this end it builds on lessons learned from experiences in different countries over the past four decades with voluntary and mandatory approaches to corporate social reporting. From this review of related initiatives, conclusions are drawn for the specification of key criteria for a framework for global responsibility and supporting processes

Why "Global Responsibility"

The term "global" captures four key dimensions characterizing the nature and scope of the field today:

First, and most evidently, the context has become global. This has always been true for the natural environment, which has never respected national boundaries, and now it also applies to the social and economic sphere. The impact of the activities of growing numbers of organizations extends beyond a single location, thus affecting employees and communities with different economic and social conditions and with different cultural norms and expectations. Stakeholders, too, increasingly operate across borders. They are becoming effective at sharing information and experiences and at exerting pressure for change around the world. Their activities have sometimes contributed to defining standards with a global reach, such as the Global Reporting Initiative or the Global Compact. An additional important dimension of the global nature of organizational behavior today is the growth of global supply chains. The impact of business activities goes not only beyond national borders, but also beyond the legally defined borders of the corporation, within global supply chains, so the concept and practice of global responsibility must include this phenomenon as well.

Second, the term “global” provides an umbrella for the different aspects of performance and responsibility, without giving primacy to one over others, and without limiting the concept to the three that are currently central to the field (economic, social and environmental). Other aspects, such as technological or scientific responsibilities may indeed rise in the coming years. The recently introduced concept of the “triple bottom line” (Elkington 1998) suffers from the restriction to three elements, and, by drawing on terminology from accounting, it presumes the desirability and possibility of quantification and calculation, thereby glossing over the fact that social and political values play a significant part. Furthermore, the “bottom line” terminology is of little use in assessing the performance and behavior of non-business types of organizations.

Third, the condition of society and of the environment is affected by the behavior of a wide variety of organizations, of which business corporations are just one. There is no logical reason that non-governmental organizations and universities, for example, should not be held as accountable for the impacts of their activities on the sustainability of society and the environment as are medium-sized companies and multinational corporations. By using the concept of “global responsibility” rather than “corporate social responsibility” attention can be focused on the full range of forms within which activities are organized in and between societies today, including local authorities, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, public-private partnerships, as well as less formally structured networks.

Fourth, the notion of “global responsibility” highlights the idea that sustainability is something all actors have a responsibility for achieving. It overcomes the division between “rights” and “responsibilities” that is inherent in the concept of “corporate social responsibility”. It suggests that the multiple internal and external stakeholders of an organization cannot limit their role to exerting their right to demand responsible behavior of this organization: they also bear responsibility for seeking and implementing sustainable solutions. This is why partnerships between different actors are particularly important in this field (Stern & Seligmann 2004).

The aim of introducing a new heading for this field is to overcome the limitations of the already impressive list of notions, such as business ethics, corporate social performance, corporate citizenship, stakeholder management or sustainable development. The first three notions, like the one of corporate social responsibility, do not take into account organizations other than companies. The terms reflect the trap that the field has fallen into: misconceiving “the corporation …[as] the sun around which society revolves” (Frederick 1998:42). The concept of stakeholder management suppresses the words “business” and “corporate” but implicitly retains the centrality of corporations, since the focus is on how they (should) manage their stakeholders (Clarkson Centre for Business Ethics 1999). The notion of sustainable development does not suffer from this limited focus on business as the key actor. For example, the European Commission indicates that while corporate social responsibility is indeed considered as the business contribution to sustainable development, other actors—particularly public authorities—should also make their own contributions (European Commission, 2002).

The notion of “sustainable development,” introduced in the Brundtland report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, also has the advantage of underlining the time dimension, i.e. the impact of today’s activities on future generations (Brundtland 1987). However, the term sustainable development is problematic as well. It has become a catchword used in many discourses, ranging from the continued primacy of growth under a different name to green economics and anti-modernism (Arts 1994). In addition to the vague or even contradictory nature of the term, it fails to reflect the responsibility dimension, it does not encompass the idea that whoever takes an action has to evaluate the possible impact on the rest of the world and is accountable for it (Biefnot, 2002). The way forward in this maze of terms would seem to lie in the pursuit of global responsibility for sustainability.

By introducing a new heading for this field, we are seeking a change in its substance and scope, not just its name. The goal is to clarify the ideas and to develop them further in order to improve practices in the daily management of organizations. By redefining the scope of the field and the role of the different actors in it, the concept of global responsibility will raise new questions, or at least draw more attention to already existing problems. For example, the heading "global responsibility" highlights the tensions between local and global perspectives, as well as to those between a separate consideration of economic, social and environmental issues and a permanently simultaneous analysis of these different dimensions. In a similar vein, an understanding of global responsibility that encompasses diverse stakeholders confronts organizations with a tension between individual and collective interests. By enlarging the focus from companies to all kinds of organizations, new complexities will also emerge that the diverse actors will have to learn how to grapple with.

The Dynamics of Global Responsibility: Organizational Learning

At a time when practitioners stress that "corporate social responsibility is an ongoing learning process for companies and stakeholders" (European Multi-stakeholder Forum on CSR 2004:4), academics are criticizing theories of corporate social responsibility and corporate social performance for being too static (Beaulieu & Pasquero 2002, Gond 2004). The current theories do not provide adequate ways of thinking about how companies learn to work with diverse stakeholders to define and fulfill multiple kinds of goals and responsibilities. The gap between static theories and the need for dynamic approaches that exists in the field of corporate social responsibility becomes even greater under the heading of global responsibility. Moving beyond corporate social responsibility to global responsibility requires organizations to think and behave differently than they have done so far. Not only does it mean that organizations that have not yet given much thought to their responsibilities for sustainable development in the world will have to start thinking and acting with a broader range of goals in mind. It also means that many companies that have a long track record in the area of “corporate social responsibility” will also have to learn to expand their agendas and their repertoire of behaviors.

The field of organizational learning offers insights into how organizations process information to expand their range of potential behaviors (Huber 1991:89), thereby creating new ways of seeing and doing things (Nonaka 1994). Learning is by definition a dynamic approach to organizational behavior (Berthoin Antal, 1998), and current thinking on organizational learning emphasizes its interactive and social nature (Wenger 1998, Nonaka, Toyama, Byosière 2001). Therefore, by drawing on insights and concepts from the field of organizational learning, the gap inherent in theories of corporate social responsibility can be overcome, and a more substantial groundwork for understanding the dynamics of global responsibility can be laid.

A review of the field of organizational learning reveals that there are multiple kinds of learning, and that organizations must master each of them and know when to take which approach (Berthoin Antal, Dierkes, Child & Nonaka 2001). Among the most important ones for global responsibility are: single loop, double loop and deutero learning (Argyris & Schön 1974, 1996), unlearning (Hedberg 1981), and knowledge creation (Nonaka 1994). By using and combining different learning strategies, organizations will learn to come to grips with the multidimensional content (economic, social, environmental and other) and the wider scope (local, national, regional, world-wide). And by engaging together, organizations are likely to learn more and faster. Recent research on organizational learning highlights the value of inter-organizational collaboration for sharing knowledge and generating synergistic solutions (Hardy, Phillips & Lawrence 2003).

Learning to pursue “global responsibility” entails not only doing some things better than before but also challenging past ways of seeing and doing things in and between organizations. Improving on current ways of doing things is one form of learning, which Argyris & Schön (1978, 1996) call “single loop learning,” as distinct from what they call “double loop learning.” For example, some companies have already experimented with corporate social reporting (Dierkes 1980; Dierkes & Hoff 1981; Preston, Rey & Dierkes 1981), so they may find that they can expand on this experience to encompass the broader demands and constituencies of global responsibility. In such cases, improving on existing ways of doing things (single loop learning) would be appropriate for generating and communicating verifiable quantitative and qualitative data on performance in multiple areas. By contrast, companies that have until now focused their attention primarily on economic performance need to think very differently about how they assess and report on their performance to include other dimensions equally seriously. Taking on board the idea of the "triple bottom line" and putting it into practice will involve double loop learning in many companies. Similarly, organizations in the public sector that have not reported publicly about the economic, environmental, social, and other impacts of their activities will need to rethink their internal procedures and introduce new measurement techniques. A third kind of learning that Argyris & Schön identify is deutero-learning, the ability to learn how to learn. The field of global responsibility demands this form of learning because the issues and stakeholders do not stand still. To keep up with or ahead of the emergence of new issues and shifting constellations of stakeholders, organizations will have to keep honing their learning skills, and they will have to learn to learn together. Deutero-learning for global responsibility requires interactive learning processes between organizations at the local, regional, national and international level.

Learning theories reveal that learning is not a linear process of knowledge accumulation and application. In fact, sometimes it is necessary to let go of engrained practices in order to be able to master new approaches. Hedberg (1981) coined the term "unlearning" to capture this idea. Mindsets and practices that have become outdated must be set aside in order for the organization to develop appropriate ways of dealing with current and future challenges. For example, the phenomenon of global supply chains requires unlearning traditional narrow conceptualizations of the organization. Corporations, such as Nike, that have tried to limit their responsibility to the activities within their legal organizational boundaries have had to unlearn this mindset in order to learn how to ensure that their entire supply chain produces in a globally responsible manner (O'Rourke 2003, Sobczak 2003a). In addition to unlearning narrow organizational boundary-setting, the concept of global responsibility challenges organizations to unlearn simple, binary conceptualizations of the distribution of roles and responsibilities between companies and their stakeholders. It is misleading to conceive of stakeholders on the one hand and companies on the other, with stakeholders playing the role of monitoring the degree of responsibility achieved by companies. In fact, every organizational actor is also a stakeholder, every stakeholder is also an actor. All share the responsibility for global sustainability. The old conceptualizations of roles and responsibilities must be unlearned before organizations can learn how to take on the mindset of common but differentiated responsibilities.

Nonaka and his colleagues (e.g., Nonaka & Toyama 2001) emphasize that learning is not just about acquiring existing knowledge, it is also about creating new knowledge. Considering the nature and scope of the challenges entailed in global responsibility for sustainability in the world, the abilities to create and use new knowledge have become essential organizational competences. Recognizing that the creation of knowledge is an interactive process, Nonaka points out the importance of securing spaces for learning together. Such spaces, for which Nonaka uses the Japanese term “ba” (Nonaka & Toyama 2001: 220), may be physically located within companies, they may be facilities shared by organizations, and they may be virtual. New communication technologies and the internet are significantly expanding the potential space for organizations and their stakeholders to learn from and with each other to enhance responsible behavior (Berthoin Antal, Dierkes, MacMillan & Marz 2002). Information about organizational performance in different locations can be shared rapidly around the world and serve as a resource for knowledge creation.

Face-to-face interactions for learning together within and between organizations, such as informal and formal gatherings, focus groups, open space conferences, can now be supplemented by virtual learning spaces. For example, intranets can be set up to support learning within organizations. By acquiring insights into how ideas worked in practice in other places, and then combining them with local knowledge so that the ideas are recontextualised for a different unit, an organization can enhance its ability to learn from experience. In a similar way, different organizations can establish a common virtual *ba* for inter-organizational learning and knowledge creation. Stakeholders monitoring organizational performance can also use the virtual space offered by the internet to share and compare information about an organization's performance in different countries, then quickly reveal gaps and discrepancies that might emerge in order to exert pressure on the organization to learn to enhance its global responsibility. The internet and related communications media not only speed up information sharing across national and organizational boundaries, they enable organizations to create learning spaces that permit rapid interactivity with a far greater range of stakeholders than is possible with traditional means of communication. For example, organizations can proactively seek out stakeholder feedback in early stages of strategy formulation. They can use virtual *ba* to engage in processes of exchanging views with diverse stakeholders around the world on organizational goals, targets and measures of performance, and to establish agreement on those to which the organization should be held accountable.

Examples of organizational learning for global responsibility

In-depth research about how different kinds of organizations are learning to practice global responsibility has yet to be conducted. But thumbnail sketches of a few examples serve to illustrate the variety of learning processes that organizations are experimenting with, often in partnership with others, to increase their global responsibility for sustainability. We have selected three cases: a savings and loan cooperative bank that engaged with an international NGO for learning, a multinational corporation and a platform created by an international organization. The first two cases to which we had access are headquartered in France, and organizational learning is strongly contextual because organizations are embedded in sociopolitical, cultural, and legislative norms (Berthoin Antal 1992; Child & Heavens 2001). However, the processes they engaged in are indicative of possible avenues for exploration in other organizations and other countries too.

Learning experience of a savings and loan cooperative bank: The Caisses d'Epargne/CNCE and the WWF

The banking sector has been undergoing significant changes throughout Europe over the past decade, largely triggered by European Union legislation on the free movement of services. Tradition-steeped financial institutions have had to restructure and reposition themselves to face international competition. The French Caisses d'Epargne (savings and loans), with over 180 years of history as locally-based cooperatives, could not avoid change. The French parliament passed the Act of June 25 1999 to define the new statutes and structure of the Caisses d'Epargne. The 450 local Caisses were organized into 30 legally independent regional Caisses, each of which has its own board of directors and supervisory board. A central institution was created at the national level to develop and coordinate the strategy of these Caisses as a group: the Caisse Nationale des Caisses d'Epargne (CNCE).

The Act of June 25 1999 anchored in law the long-standing underlying values of the cooperatives by explicitly linking the aim of economic growth with the pursuit of general societal interests. Accordingly, the mission of the Caisses d'Epargne includes supporting social and environmental projects. Furthermore, they are required to offer an account to every citizen, irrespective of their profitability as clients, and they provide financing for public housing. In other words, the concept of global responsibility underpins the raison d'être of the Caisses d'Epargne, but exactly what this meant they should do in the 21st century was a matter that had yet to be formulated and learned.

One of the strategic decisions of the CNCE in 2001 was to make a strong commitment to sustainability. The CNCE saw the concept of sustainable development as an opportunity to renew the historical social values of the Caisses in a changing context (David 2003; www.caisse-epargne.com). Internally, the concept was a means of reinforcing the strong company culture with the 45,000 employees in France. Externally, sustainability offered a platform for facilitating the creation of international alliances with banks sharing similar values. The CNCE proposed a multi-step process to the regional Caisses. The first step was to assess the current impacts on sustainability of the Caisses' activities. The second was to formulate actions for improvement. And, the third was to evaluate progress.

> *The CNCE decided that the process should start with an evaluation by what the group considered to be its primary stakeholders: the employees. The idea was to organize an evaluation by the employees using the knowledge and*

skills developed by the first French social rating agency ARESE (which has since been transformed into VIGEO) (Zarlowski 2004). The CNCE is a major shareholder of the social rating agency and appears to have learned from this role about assessing a broad range of impacts for sustainability. It seemed logical not only to support this agency in developing social ratings in other companies, but also to subject itself to such a procedure.

The CNCE recommended to the regional Caisses that they conduct the internal evaluation by creating cross-functional working groups composed of employees from different levels of the organization, thereby bringing a varied range of experience and perspectives to the task. Such a participative approach had never been tried before in the organization, so the fact that in 2001 25 of the 30 regional Caisses took up the suggestion represented a broad willingness to undertake a double loop learning process. The learning was powerful in terms of both process and content.

A first outcome of the cross-functional groups was the process in itself, which created a new framework for stakeholder dialogue at a time when the relations between management and the unions were rather difficult. The Caisses were renegotiating traditional employment conditions and benefits to adapt to the new competitive market environment. In light of the negotiations, some regional human resource directors were initially reluctant to install cross-functional groups of employees because they feared the groups would be used to create new demands for the unions. The unions, for their part, were initially skeptical because they feared that employees might be misused to generate positive assessments of the Caisse's performance. Experience with the working groups allayed both sets of fears. Management did not find the groups to be manipulated, and the unions were reassured by the principle governing the cross-functional groups: each group had to achieve consensus about the rating it gave to each item, and in cases where no agreement could be reached, the lower assessment would be retained.

The second learning outcome concerns the content of the evaluation. The Caisses assessed the impacts of their activities in five policy areas, based on the categories used by the social rating agency: the environment; human resources; clients & suppliers; governance; society. Each cross-functional group focused on one policy area. Considering the traditional commitment to social issues that is engrained in the organization, it is not surprising that the evaluation by the employees showed that the bank had quite positive results within the social and societal dimension. Similarly, the cooperative statute explains the good evaluation of the group's governance. However, the outcomes of the study on the Caisses' impacts on the environment were critical. Traditionally, the bank had considered that its service activity had very *little impact on the natural environment. The cross-functional working groups concluded that the bank should undertake significant reductions in environmental pollution. They recommended energy conservation measures in the branch offices and changes in procedures reduce the use of paper (for example by printing on both sides of customer statements). Even more importantly, the working groups found that the Caisses could exert a positive impact on the environment by integrating sustainability into the heart of their business as a bank, for example by favoring a more ecological way of constructing buildings financed by the bank (public housing). In other words, the outcome of the review was single loop learning in those areas where incremental improvements in internal processes were necessary, and double-loop learning in others where new ways of defining problems and solutions had to be developed, particularly in the area of the natural environment.*

The CNCE realized that it needed help to achieve its learning in unknown territory. In order to improve the group's environmental performance, the CNCE decided to build a partnership with the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF). This partnership is built on the complementary skills of two different actors and shows investors that financial and environmental aspects may be reconciled in the long term. For example, the WWF participates in the evaluation of the social projects the Caisses are committed by their charter to supporting. The Caisses have learned from this cooperation that it is better to give a project a larger subsidy to enable it to buy an ecological vehicle than to provide funds for the cheapest possible vehicle. The partnership with WWF also resulted in a procedure according to which investors—and particularly the public authorities—seeking financing from a local Caisse d'Epargne for a public housing project would be systematically informed by the WWF about ecological modes of construction. The advantage is to reach investors that have no particular environmental awareness, but who may be convinced by the fact that the bank and WWF prove that an ecological way of construction may be financially advantageous through its reduction of energy consumption. The partnership between the Caisses and the WWF illustrates the effectiveness of inter-organizational learning for global responsibility. Each of the partners brought to the process their specific perspectives and expertise (financial, environmental), and together created new knowledge to enable clients to make investments in sustainability.

The CNCE is committed to monitoring the progress of the Group in all five policy areas. Many of the cross-functional working groups that were launched in 2001 chose to institutionalize themselves rather than disbanding after completing their original evaluation assignment. Those regional agencies that did not participate in the first evaluation have created working groups in the meantime. In addition to the internal processes put in place as of 2001, an *external evaluation by the rating agency VIGEO is scheduled for 2004. The combination of approaches taken to initiate and maintain learning for global sustainability suggests that the Caisses d'Epargne, with strategic guidance from the CNCE, are putting deutero learning into practice.*

Learning experience of a multinational corporation: Danone

Created in 1966, the Danone Group is a multinational corporation in the food sector, headquartered in Paris. Although younger than the Caisses d'Epargne, Danone, too, is characterized by a strong corporate culture that seeks to reconcile social and economic goals (Giraud 2001). As early as 1972, the founder and CEO of the company, Antoine Riboud, publicly espoused values that we would now associate with global responsibility for sustainability. He made a very ambitious speech in which he defined his vision of a responsible company, and expressed his disagreement with the French employers' association, CNPF, that at the time was far from accepting other responsibilities than those imposed by law or by the shareholders. When the CNPF refused his request to address its annual meeting in Marseille, Antoine Riboud organised a press conference in a bar next to the place where the annual meeting took place. In his speech, he asserted that "a company's responsibility does not end at the office door or the factory gate, since its action affects the community as a whole" and that "Growth must never be an end itself. It is a tool that should never diminish quality of life, but instead enhance it" (Danone 2004:56). Riboud played a key role in embedding this combination of values into Danone while he served as its president for about 30 years.

The rapid recent internationalization of the company has challenged the culture. Whereas in the past the company's culture had been relatively easy to create and to transmit orally because the group had most of its employees in France, this is no longer as easy within a company with 80,000 employees where the proportion of employees outside Western Europe has risen from 8% to 72% in the last ten years. Danone's approach to internationalization has been to maintain a relatively decentralized organization by building trusting relationships with local managers (Sardin 2003). It has sought ways of communicating its corporate culture to units around the world while also enriching it with the cultures of its local partners. The transformation into a global company led the management "to consider new methods and procedures to share best practices and a common culture" (Thibaux 2003). One of the reasons the management focused on values was that it saw them as a key factor in its acquisition strategy. Since 1996, the group has acquired an average of one company every two months. Most of these acquisitions started off as strategic alliances with family owned businesses, and the way of doing business constitutes a major factor in the choice by the owners to engage with Danone rather than with other multinational companies.

In 2001 the group decided to develop a tool, the Danone Way, whose aim was to provide managers with a framework for the social responsibility policies of all the companies in the Group. The Danone Way reflects the practicality and decentralization that are characteristic of Danone's corporate culture. The tool was designed to help management around the world to achieve their ambitious financial objectives while integrating a long-term perspective based on stakeholder management. Indeed, according to Danone, global responsibility is a matter of day-to-day practices in and around factories and other sites, not just at headquarters. The first step was to launch an assessment process, covering 130 questions regarding five categories of stakeholders: employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers and local communities. Within each business unit this self-assessment is co-ordinated by the members of its management board with the assistance of multifunctional working groups composed of staff from different levels of the organization. Using online tools embedded in the Danone intranet site that connects companies around the world, the working groups rate their company in critical areas on a scale of 1 to 4:

- Level 1 denotes that there is no defined policy on this issue.
- Level 2 denotes that action exists but there are still no measuring indicators.
- Level 3 corresponds to a policy whose application is controlled and monitored over time using indicators.
- Level 4 corresponds to excellence and/or an innovation in the practice.

The local management then formulates action plans to address the areas the study revealed as weak. The Danone Group pilot committee at headquarters reviews the results of the assessments and gives feedback to the unit on the action plans.

The intranet site establishes a virtual learning space for the companies of the Danone Group around the world. It has three main functions:

- It presents the vision behind the Danone Way and explains the practicalities so that employees at all levels can understand the approach. For example, among the items related to employees, the first question concerns the respect of fundamental social rights as defined by the International Labour Office (ILO) conventions. Hyperlinks allow employees to access the precise content of each of these conventions.
- It provides the tools for conducting self-evaluations and formulating action plans to address the issues identified by the assessment. Very concrete examples are given of the kind of behavior or activity that corresponds to each rating level. For example, in the field of non discrimination the different levels of performance are defined as follows: Level 1 corresponds to a business unit that is acquainted with ILO conventions; level 2 to a business unit where ILO conventions serve as a yardstick to assess current conditions and identify situations where discrimination may occur; level 3 to a business unit that takes preventive and concrete action to safeguard equality of opportunity for groups concerned, and ensures that managers implement these measures; level 4 to a business unit that tracks relevant indicators annually which show that it is clearly in the vanguard in its country of operation. The choice of the rating has to be based on the relevant concrete actions within the business unit. This definition of the different levels enables employees to undertake the ratings themselves and to suggest actions to correct problems they find. The examples given by the different business units are collected centrally and constitute a database of good practices from which other business units can learn, thereby stimulating deutero learning across the organization.
- The Danone Way intranet synthesizes the results from the different sites so that achievements and gaps are clearly visible. Such presentation techniques as the spider’s web graph (see Figure 1) prompt a strong awareness of where the company needs to engage in single or double loop

learning. Areas in which ratings are lowest are likely to require double loop learning because such low scores signal that the topic has not yet been embedded in the values and procedures of the organization. The graphic presentation of results also helps employees identify areas where they need to engage in unlearning.

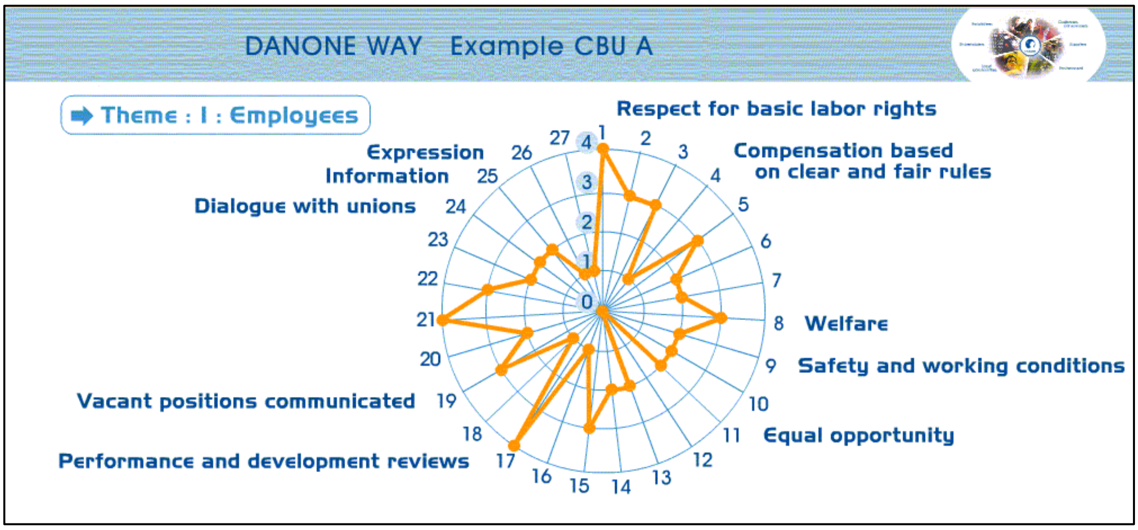

FIGURE 1: Extract from the Danone Way intranet – Results of the evaluation in one particular business unit in the field of employees (Thibaux 2003)

A typical challenge for multinationals to unlearn is the mindset that the operations in the country of origin are consistently the most advanced in the group. In Danone, for example, the assessment in the human resources domain revealed that the French operations were performing lower than other sites in the area of non-discrimination. They had to unlearn their traditional mentality and engage in double loop learning in order to conform with the Group's commitment to non-discrimination.

With the help of the Danone Way, the Group's ambition is to introduce a continuous learning approach (i.e., deutero learning) and to obtain ever more accurate reporting on all global responsibility issues. When the pilot of the Danone Way started in 2001, a dozen subsidiaries participated, and by the end of 2003, 75% of all group subsidiaries were involved. The audit is scheduled to be repeated every two years to track progress. The speed and the type of progress depend very much on the unit in question. For example, at one of Danone's biscuit factories in China the first Danone Way action plan had little environmental content. Two years later, the unit felt environmental issues should take a central position, so it embarked on a process of double loop learning. The results of the audit are linked with human resource tools to ensure implementation. For example, on issues that the company deems particularly critical during a given period, specific targets are included in individual objectives for managers and reviewed in their annual evaluation procedure.

In addition to the internal mechanisms Danone has undertaken to stimulate and tracking its progress on organizational learning for global responsibility, there are several external mechanisms that heighten accountability. The company has commissioned audits from PricewaterhouseCoopers to assess practical commitment to global responsibility principles, including the deployment of Danone Way at its subsidiaries. Furthermore, Danone publishes an annual social responsibility report that reviews group initiatives in this area and includes the Danone Way indicators to track progress. Recent French legislation is also having an impact on how Danone exercises and reports on its global responsibility. The group is subject to the law on New Economic Regulations (NRE) of 2001 that requires companies listed on the French stock exchange to include a section on social and environmental performance in its audited annual report, using a battery of indicators to assure comparability over time and with other companies.

Learning experience from an international organization:
The United Nations Global Compact

The Global Compact was launched in 2000 at the initiative of the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. The intention was to advance universal social and environmental principles by bringing together the private sector, civil society, and United Nations agencies. The underlying principle is to stimulate change through learning in a spirit of partnership rather than regulation, and in the form of networks rather than hierarchy and bureaucracy (Ruggie 2002 & 2004b). The process relies on "public accountability, transparency, and the enlightened self-interest" of the diverse participants in the network (Global

Compact Office 2004). Membership has grown rapidly, standing at 1,873 organizations in 40 countries in October 2004 (www.unglobalcompact.org). They include not only large multinational companies but also small and medium sized enterprises, public sector organizations as well as universities and business schools, and even cities.

In the Global Compact, the concept of global responsibility encompasses four key areas: human rights, labor issues, the natural environment, and corruption. Signatory organizations commit themselves to:

- Setting in motion changes to business operations so that the principles of the Global Compact become embedded in the strategy, culture, and day-to-day operations of the organization
- Publicly advocating the principles of the Global Compact so that other actors in society come to understand and actively support them in whichever context they may be living and working
- Publishing annual reports describing what they have done to implement the principles of the Global Compact (Global Compact Office 2004).

One of the advantages of the Global Compact is to bring together different kinds of organizations and to consider that each of them has not only responsibilities but may also help the others to make progress by sharing and drawing on experiences developed in different contexts. In the spirit of mutual learning across sectors, Kofi Annan decided in 2004 to implement the Global Compact principles in the procurement policy and in human resources in the UN headquarters by learning, from the practices developed by business (Annan 2004). This statement marks an important change to the traditional approach of corporate responsibility: whereas in the original conception companies are supposed to make progress under the influence of their stakeholders' pressure, Kofi Annan proposed a paradigm shift by positioning the private sector as a source of models for integrating social and environmental criteria in the management of other organizations. To the extent that business have in the past been seen as examples for public organizations, it was only in the economic dimension, not in the societal one, where NGOs and public authorities were supposed to be not only more legitimate but also more efficient. Thus, the use of practices developed by the business sector may lead to double loop learning within public organizations.

Another example of interorganizational learning from experience is the co-operation between companies and academics in the framework of the Global Compact. In 2003, the Global Compact started an initiative in partnership with the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) in order to allow companies and business schools to jointly enhance their skills in the field of global responsibility. The aim is to develop research, training and education, but also to increase the responsibility of both kinds of organizations, companies and business schools. More generally, the Global Compact offers a learning platform where organizations and academics may cooperate in order to enhance global responsibility and to move "from principles to practice" (Global Compact Learning Forum 2004). Companies participating in the Global Compact are asked to illustrate their policies by submitting case studies for publication on the program's website. The process of preparing the written case studies supports the learning process within the organization. Then, sharing the case studies on the Global Compact website makes the ideas available for other organizations to draw on. An additional learning process is offered to organizations in the form of academic review and peer discussion. If they wish, organizations may submit their case for academics to analyse. Such independent external reviews offer an opportunity for internal learning to improve future decision-making and external communication. Furthermore, it increases the credibility of the case studies and makes the process more transparent for external stakeholders. The analyses are then presented at meetings of the Global Compact Learning Forum that are regularly organized in different parts of the world. During the meetings, working groups composed of different stakeholders participating in the Global Compact follow a process of appreciative inquiry to draw the learning out of the case studies (The Global Compact Leaders Summit 2004:4). This process of case study review and discussion has already generated three publications dealing with particular aspects of global responsibility, such as HIV/AIDS and the environment. All the case studies are available on the Global Compact's website (www.unglobal compact.org).

In summary, the Global Compact supports organizational learning through a combination of learning processes and spaces. In addition to face-to-face interactions in working groups and conferences, the Global Compact (like the Danone Way) is deeply linked to the use of information technologies that facilitate the communication in an international context. Whereas the Danone Way is conceived as an intranet whose access is limited to the group's employees, the Global Compact is designed to diffuse information among the widest possible range of stakeholders about the practices of the participating organizations in the field of global responsibility. The Global Compact website uses many of the opportunities offered by the internet, such as a search function within the site and the possibility to download publications. Most importantly the Global Compact site has the potential for interactivity because any stakeholder can comment on case studies published by the participating organizations. However, their comments are not publicly available on the website and organizations are not required to engage in a dialogue about the comments they receive. So the interactive potential of the internet for organizational learning is underexploited at this time. It is significant, however, that the virtual learning space is supplemented by physical learning spaces in the form of national and international meetings at which representatives of organizations and stakeholders have the opportunity to interact, exchange information and, ideally, create new knowledge together.

Speeding up Organizational Learning for Global Responsibility

The examples provided above indicate that different kinds of organizations have discovered how to undertake different kinds of learning in a variety of strategic policy areas and with multiple internal and external stakeholders. There is evidence that organizations can recognize the need for single loop and double loop learning to improve their performance on several dimensions of sustainability simultaneously. Tools to support such learning are becoming available and organizations are tailoring them to meet their needs while also increasing the transparency of their reporting on activities and outcomes to diverse stakeholders. Organizations are establishing and using a combination of learning spaces across national and organizational boundaries. Their experiments are encouraging, but the scope remains limited and the spread of experience too slow in light of the magnitude of the organizational learning challenges for global responsibility. What can be done to maximize the number of organizations participating in learning, and to increase the speed of their learning? Experience with the diffusion of corporate social reporting practices may provide some indications of how to stimulate organizational learning for global responsibility.

The history of the diffusion of corporate social reporting shows that voluntary experimentation is essential for the development of frameworks, indicators, and procedures. However, voluntary experimentation alone does not activate the majority of organizations. Legislation ensures a broad uptake of ideas and practices, but it risks stifling innovation.

A brief review of the developments of the past decades reveals the fragility of social innovations that are subject to the waxing and waning of interest in voluntary reporting (Berthoin Antal, Dierkes, MacMillan, Marz 2002). Building on social accounting techniques developed in the 1960s, driven by burgeoning concern about the impacts of corporate activities on society, and supported by a mood of experimentation, a flurry of approaches to measuring and reporting on corporate social performance emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s. With the support of academics, European companies voluntarily launched the most comprehensive models in the 1970s (Task Force on Corporate Social Performance 1979). Then, the 1980s saw a drop in interest and innovation in corporate social performance and reporting. In the absence of legislation, when the topic slipped off the socio-political agenda, the lessons learned from the leading edge companies were not consolidated and applied by a large proportion of the corporate population (Berthoin Antal & Dierkes 1986).

Among other factors, several pieces of national legislation in member states of the European Union have favoured a renewed interest in social reporting since the beginning of the new millennium (European Commission, 2004). These laws and regulations impose transparency either on investment funds, which subsequently exert pressure on companies via the financial markets, or they target companies directly (Sobczak, 2003c). For example in the first category, recent British legislation obliges pension funds since 1999 to make public the extent to which social, environmental or ethical criteria are taken into consideration in the selection, retention and liquidation of investments (Occupational Pension Schemes, Amendment Regulation 1999, Statutory Instrument 1999 n° 1849). Two years later, largely inspired by the British example, Germany introduced legislation obliging pension funds to specify to savers whether they take into consideration ethical, social and environmental criteria (Article 7, Altersvermögensgesetz of 26 June 2001: §1 (9) Altersvorsorgeverträgezertifizierungsgesetz). In France, a similar trend is to be noted in the Law on Employee Saving Plans, which requires employee saving funds to report annually on the extent to which they take account of social, environmental or ethical considerations (Law 2001-152 of 9 February 2001), and in the Law on the Public Pensions Reserve Fund, whose management board must disclose similar information (Law 2001-624 of 17 July 2001).

In the second category, that of legislation designed to impose transparency directly on companies, France offers extensive experience because it passed legislation in 1977 requiring all organizations with more than 300 employees to prepare a social report ("bilan social"). To ensure comparability and transparency, the law stipulated that organizations had to report on a comprehensive list of indicators and discuss them with representatives of labor before submitting the report and the opinion of the works council to the public labour inspection. However, the detailed approach and the narrow focus on employee matters stifled experimentation, and it is unclear whether the results of the reports stimulated enhanced social performance in many organizations because the documents were not made publicly available. The French experience attracted international attention as an opportunity for learning (Christophe & Bebbington 1992). Legislators in France also sought to learn from the experience, and passed a new law in 2001 (NRE) that extended the scope of corporate reporting, now including indicators for the natural environment, for example, and mandating the publication of the results with the annual report.[2]

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[2] Note that the NRE law of 2001 covers a broader content than the 1977 law on the bilan social, but it applies only to companies listed on the French stock exchange (CAC), whereas the 1977 law on the bilan social, which is still in force, applies to all types of organizations with more than 300 employees. In one sense, then, the first law was more "global" than the newer law.

It is still too early to tell how well this new legislation will work as an instrument of organizational learning, so future research will have to track its effects (Berthoin Antal & Sobczak 2004b). Preliminary studies already show the limitations of a purely formal approach imposed by legislation, because it is difficult to give a uniform legal definition of social criteria that would be relevant for all companies, but also of the borders of a company and its subcontractors. For example, some companies found ways to circumvent it by deciding to publish the required social information only about operations at the French headquarters, even though just a fraction of the employees was working there, thereby leaving out of the report the problems in subsidiaries abroad. Although they formally respect the law (admittedly, the formulation on this point is vague) (Sobczak 2003b), these reports definitely do not reflect the spirit of the law. By contrast, good reporting practices may even entail applying different criteria than those generally specified by the law. For example, after the law was introduced, Danone decided not to change its way of reporting based on the Danone Way, which seemed particularly well adapted to the company. Formally, the report does not respect all the criteria defined by the French legislation, but it fulfills the spirit of the legislation and it is even considered as one of the best ones in France (Goudard & Itier 2004; Utopies, SustainAbility & UNEP 2003).

A different tack has been taken in the past decade since interest in corporate social responsibility started to re-emerge after the single-minded focus on maximizing shareholder value revealed its costs, and economic and environmental problems loomed large. Once more, attention has turned to developing ways to measure and report on corporate social performance. This time around it is not individual companies that have taken the initiative, but rather multi-stakeholder groups, often with the support of international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union. They are seeking to establish voluntary standards, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and AccountAbility 1000 (AA 1000) (Leipziger 2003). Proponents of the voluntary frameworks hope to avoid the imposition of laws mandating reporting, but they risk losing momentum once more if the issues slip down the agenda in the coming years.

To summarize, there are now three different approaches to corporate social reporting based either on company driven experimentation, on legislation or on voluntary multi-stakeholder standards. In order to stimulate the largest possible number of organizations to "learn to learn" to achieve global responsibility for sustainability, a combination of these three approaches seems more promising than choosing one approach over the other, as has been characteristic of the field of corporate social responsibility to date (Ward 2003).

A mix of voluntary and binding approaches in the field of global responsibility could create interesting synergies (Gordon 1999). A model in this direction has been proposed for one policy area, namely the "Open Labor Standards" (Fung, O'Rourke & Sabel, 2001). The idea is that public authorities should make it mandatory for all companies to adopt a policy of social responsibility and to report annually on the way this policy is implemented and monitored. The model does not impose specific content or targets that the companies must achieve, nor common criteria for the report. In other words, while the process is binding, the content is voluntary. The intention is to put in motion a virtuous cycle of continuous improvements generated by transparency and competition. All stakeholders would have access to data bases containing the company reports, public authorities would rank companies with best practices, and the competitive comparison would create market pressure to push companies to develop new initiatives. In this spirit the European Commission launched an initiative in 2003 to identify the "Best Workplaces in the European Union," open to all kinds of organizations (private and public, including government agencies and NGOs with at least 50 employees and located in an EU member state). Awards are given to those organizations with outstanding practices in the fields of life-long learning, gender equality and diversity, thereby stimulating organizations to improve their performance and learn from others (http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment social/soc-dial/csr/eu100best.htm).

It remains to be seen how effective this mix of mandatory policy formulation and reporting with voluntary competition for recognition is in stimulating learning and improved performance in the area of employment policy. Some organizations are more exposed to stakeholder pressure and more sensitive to reputation than others are. Will those organizations that experience less pressure be sufficiently motivated to learn to upgrade or, if necessary, to undertake deutero learning to revolutionize their policies and practices?

Global responsibility for sustainability is of course too complex and too important a challenge to be left to competitions for recognition alone. And, it would be a mistake to continue entrust developments in the field solely to voluntary experimentation. Experience shows that the issue attention cycle is bound to move on, so it is crucial to take advantage of the current momentum for learning that has built up during the waxing of the cycle. Therefore, the ideas of (a) requiring organizations to formulate their policy on global responsibility, (b) to report each year on what they have (or have not) achieved and (c) building accessible data bases for all interested parties to use are worth developing in order to speed up organizational learning for global responsibility.

Unlike the “Open Labor Standards” model, the framework for global responsibility should apply not just to companies, but to all kinds of organizations, and it should definitely include content guidelines. Enough knowledge and expertise in the different areas of global responsibility have been generated by the individual experiments and the group standard setting work of the past decades for a mandated framework to encompass guidelines for content. The scope could be expanded in subsequent years, if and when multi-stakeholder learning processes reveal that other areas must be included. The framework and the content guidelines should be formulated in such a way as to encourage further experimentation while maintaining comparability of results over time and across organizations.

The mandated framework for global responsibility would have to go beyond a data base, because that alone does not guarantee learning. As the cases outlined in this contribution illustrate, the very processes of formulating a policy and reviewing achievements and gaps while preparing a report stimulate organizational learning. Then, sharing the experiences across organizations should be supported by a combination of virtual learning spaces, like the websites of the Global Compact, and physical learning spaces, such as multi-stakeholder workshops with appreciative inquiry techniques.

The thorny question of sanctions remains to be tackled. A weakness running through all the approaches so far is the lack of sufficiently powerful sanctions on organizations that do not adhere to norms. All too often, social and environmental laws have merely symbolic penalties. Serious and creative thinking is needed to develop effective sanctions to ensure that non-learning is as quickly and visibly penalized as active learning is rewarded.

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